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ABSTRACT

While reading teachers have routinely introduced pre-reading activation strategies for decades, literature teachers are trained to become expert on what happens after reading, to be adept at follow-up, to be agile with close analysis of an already finished reading experience. As a result of a presentation by a reading specialist, a veteran secondary school English teacher began to experiment with pre-reading strategies. His American literature students responded well to the activities used to introduce a difficult selection. The teacher, who received release time to work alongside first- and second-year teachers, also noted the potential usefulness of pre-reading activities in a chemistry class and a biology class. Five other teachers (a reading teacher, a European history teacher, and three English teachers) in the school district (at middle school, junior high, and high school levels) have traced the impact of pre-reading strategies on student achievement. Students made personal connections to the texts they were reading which led to increased achievement scores and a dramatically changed classroom atmosphere. Three recurring themes emerged from the experiences of these teachers: (1) the pre-reading activities themselves provided students with overt models of a thoughtful, questioning demeanor; (2) activating the students' emotions was essential as a "reading strategy"; and (3) in several cases, the teacher's own methodology seemed to become more innovative as the reading or unit study proceeded. (RS)

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INTO THE WOODS:

The Impact of Pre-Reading Activities

by Lee Patton

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As I observed a second-year English teacher distribute novels to her eighth graders, I recalled my own practices--or lack of them--when introducing readings to my own students throughout several years teaching literature. Like the teacher standing before this class, I would have supplied only a few remarks on the content, a teaser about the plot, favorable reviews from former students, a word about the author and social context, and a schedule for reading check quizzes and chapter discussions. I could've continued using this non-strategy for pre-reading for the rest of my career, this strictly pro forma introductory shtick. I could go on breathing a sigh of relief when my students were finally "into" the reading and anticipating with pleasure the discussions, debates, and insights that would follow the final chapter quiz. As the eighth grade teacher said at the end of the period, "I realized last night that today would be the perfect time to start the novel--a Monday morning when they're burned-out from Spring Break. So I didn't really think of any of any pre-reading activities or questions. Should I have?"

That's my question, too. Nothing in my training as a literature teacher nor in my observations and consultations with my colleagues led me to ask it, let alone attempt to answer it. While reading teachers have routinely introduced pre-reading activation strategies for decades, literature teachers have almost opposite orientation; we're trained to become expert on what happens after reading, to be adept at follow-up, to be agile with close analysis of an already finished reading experience. This is perfectly logical, of course: of what relevance are a reader's readiness, motivation, and thoughtfulness in the prelude to the prelude?

As a classroom teacher released from teaching to work alongside our district's first-and second-year teachers, I have had a unique chance to explore this question in a variety of classrooms, mostly with middle and high school English teachers but also with science and social studies teachers. I began with a hunch that pre-reading activation strategies are far more important, even crucial, than I had previously supposed.

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My hunch about the importance of activation led me to reflect on my own history as a reader. Following a pubescent sci-fi binge, my first adult novel was 1984, which I devoured at fourteen in a naive delusion it would prophesy the fate awaiting me in eighteen years. (No, Orwell did not foresee Ronald Reagan, sushi, or Imelda Marcos.) At sixteen I somehow got the notion that Sinclair Lewis could answer the innumerable perplexities I had about my own isolated small town in his novel Main Street, a dated and cumbersome work which I found compelling enough to read straight through on a string of summer days. As a high school senior I assumed that J.D. Salinger would have the answer, the antidote for my free-floating late-adolescent angst in Fanny and Zooey. My "answer" still unsupplied but seduced by his characters' animated bemusement, I read all of Salinger's works in short order. I was not a bookworm nor even a browser, but I was a fledgling literary pragmatist--my motivation was entirely intrinsic, even selfish; I plunged into each new fiction with an odd, almost devotional certainty that the author would disclose vital life-information. In fact my questions were so many and my bemusement and perplexity so intense that I presumed that modern novels were the best survival manuals available. While my friends were reading The Hobbit, I was studying Babbitt as if it were the Key to Mysteries.

Naturally, I did not grow up to be a normal person. I became an English teacher, and one day quite deep into my career I was invited to a presentation by our department's reading specialist. She argued that all students needed a context before they read, a tie to their own experience, and if no personal relevance could be established, then maybe the reading selection itself was inappropriate. We literature teachers argued back with some vehemence that the whole point of reading literature was exposure to the unfamiliar--to broaden the reader's horizons and challenge the reader's limited scope and presuppositions. If it were to be deemed "literature," then by its very nature it was relevant to human experience.

Our meeting revealed the classic tension between the reading teacher's schematic, pragmatic, reader-centered approach and the literature teacher's text-centered, aesthetic orientation. By investigating my own early exposure to literature, it was easy to confirm the literature teachers' argument: each novel led me into worlds that became relevant and real only as I turned more pages; each supplied a backwoods boy with a

degree of sophistication, a degree of readiness for his complex, metropolitan future. Because my motivation to read was really a hunger for a wider context, to some extent literature for me <u>became</u> the context.

Still, the tension triggered by the reading presentation remained with me for some time. The reading teacher's challenge nagged at me despite my counterarguments about literature's inherent validity. For how could I lead reluctant students to literature without worrying about its relevance to them? So the central question for my teaching became: How could I replicate my own teenage compulsion to read in my students, whose compulsions were leading them instead into pop culture, drugs, alcohol, materialism?

The Bear, The Mole, and Birth Defects: Classrooms With and Without Pre-Reading Activities

My first experiment with this expanded, deliberate concept of pre-reading began immediately after the reading meeting, since I was introducing Faulkner's "The Bear" to my American literature students the following day. This story is widely anthologized because it is one of the few shorter, self-contained selections available in Faulkner's high style--which is to say Faulkner at his peak of overblown prose, endless sentences, and omniscient grandeur (some would say pomposity). And even though this selection was edited (some would say butchered) for student consumption, the mass of my stunningly average juniors and seniors had experienced difficulty with this reading in the past. So I threw out my plan to sermonize briefly on Faulkner, his significance, and his daunting style, then walk them briefly through the gist of the story's structure, then leave them struggling alone in its Mississippi wilderness of subordinate clauses.

Instead I began class by asking, "Have any of you had experiences hunting in the woods?" When several hands shot up, including a few female hands, I invited each student to comment briefly. This soon evolved into a debate on the moral propriety of killing defenseless animals which, however predictable, was deeply felt and passionate on all sides. After pro and con defined their positions, the central question arose naturally: "Beyond the technical skills involved, is there anything of importance to be learned from a hunting experience?" This inspired the most interesting recollections--and reflections. Young men and women spoke

spontaneously of tests of perception and courage, confidence gained and lost, of moral repulsion and moral victory, and most of all, of relationships with fathers, elders, and mentors that were enriched--or estranged--by the challenges of hunting.

We'd spent most of the period in what I've come to call the emotional activation of prior knowledge, although this kind of pre-discussion is obviously intellectual as well. Was it nothing more than a time-consuming, random rap session? I only had a few minutes for comments on the story, pointing out the story's leaps in time and asking them to think of that same central question as Ike, the boy in the story, would answer it. As my students left class with the reading as homework, I sat back, impressed that we'd just discussed several of the story's key issues with more depth and passion than previous students had after finishing the story, and we hadn't yet turned a page. How would our discussion affect the comprehension and analysis?

The next day I unconsciously began my research by having the students complete the same reading check quiz as had previous classes. Even though this group had generally performed below the average for a literature course, their scores on "The Bear" quiz were far above their own previous achievement and that of prior, brighter groups who'd read the story without "emotional activation." So much for the literal level of understanding. How would they perform at higher levels of analysis?

The follow-up discussion was distinctly improved as well. The question about Ike's "learnings" seemed to organize the story into palatable, coherent units for most students, so that they could easily infer how his understanding deepened from ages seven to eleven to fourteen. Most important, Ike seemed to be one of them, another teenager who had much to learn in the woods, alive behind the exertions and exaltations of Faulkner's prose. Unlike previous students who typically resented Faulkner's difficulty, this group accepted it as part of the challenge. Example by example, question by question, from puzzlement to speculation, most students reexamined the story with a compulsion to understand that was not so different from Ike's own urge to discovery.

That's it--Ike's progress in the story provides a metaphor for a more discovery-based, thoughtful approach to teaching and mentoring that I tried to grasp and define in the course of my research. Ike comes to

discover that the object of the hunt is not to kill the bear but to appreciate its power and hegemony in the wild. None of his various mentors tells him this, though all his elders guide Ike's forays into the woods from a watchful distance. In the end, Ike's father helps him clarify the possible meanings of his communion with the wild, but always indirectly with poetry, with questions, by thinking aloud with his son.

Exactly what aspect of the wilderness metaphor resonated for my research into pre-reading? Maybe I was questioning ever more urgently (yet at a "watchful distance") the usefulness of the teacher as "high priest" interpreting sacred texts for survival in the woods. Maybe Ike's long and deliberate opportunity to discover his own meanings served as an imaginative model by raising the crucial question: How did his mentors provide the opportunity so fortuitously? As teachers and mentors, are we more guides than high priests, more framers of opportunities than oracles of received ideas?

My growing interest in the initial stage of this "fortuitous framing" happened to coincide with the training several of my assigned teachers were receiving in thinking skills. Through techniques such as wordsplash and various pre-reading logs and inventories, these teachers were challenged to activate prior knowledge as part of a cycle of critical thinking activities. These teachers reported enhanced interest and motivation when they tried, for example, wordsplash upon introducing old reliables such as <u>The Diary of Anne Frank</u> and <u>Romeo and Juliet</u>. Clearly, these activities were successful at building intrinsic motivation, compelling and personal "needs to read." But what were their impact on comprehension, on deeper discoveries of analysis and evaluation of the works introduced?

One of my first discoveries was about the impact of the <u>lack</u> of pre-reading activation--when I visited a chemistry class. The teacher had asked me to observe for a tension she'd sensed: why did the students seem so frustrated by the problems following the assigned chapter on the infamous "mole"? Because the students had studied the chapter the prior week, I read the chapter before my observation--often retracing my steps due to my incomprehension--so I was surprised when the teacher spent the entire period teaching the previously assigned chapter as if it were new learning. The students were full of questions and puzzlement as they co-solved the problems scattered throughout the reading. Confused by

their frustrated confusion, I began to question students when they moved into study groups. No student I spoke with had actually "read" the chapter; instead the standard technique was to "jump ahead to the problems at the end of the chapter, then go back to the sample problems in the chapter if there are any we can't solve." Each student regarded as irrelevant the thicket of prose that I'd spent two hours hacking through; yet I, a slower study in the sciences than most of these students, understood the mole, its evolution and purpose and significance, and had found the class discussion simply redundant. I asked students what strategies had they applied to their readiness for "reading" of the chapter? "Strategies? What strategies?", one student answered as she tore her incorrect solutions into tiny, angry fragments. "Dude, this is chemistry."

I explained how I'd scanned the prior chapter for context, skimmed the assigned chapter's boldface headings, studied the charts, read the scientist biographies in sidebars, then read the chapter summary before reading the chapter itself. The student looked at me like I was nuts. "The main thing is," she explained, "to concentrate your energy on the problems. And if you can't solve them, that's what she's here for." She pointed to the teacher, who was tutoring another frustrated study group across the lab.

The teacher's lamentations after class echoed my own: If only the students had some prior strategies for tackling the difficult, dense prose of the chapter, then each student could walk into the problem-solving session prepared for the higher-level challenges rather than puzzle over basics already anticipated and explained in the reading itself.

This disregard of a reading selection's purpose--to provide background when little "prior knowledge" exists--seems epidemic in the content area classes I observed. How many history and biology teachers spend the greatest bulk of class time explaining information already "covered" in chapters no one--student or teacher--mysteriously expects anyone to "know" prior to the chapter discussion, even though everyone expects the chapter to have been "read."

An alternative approach, a possible link between pre-reading strategies and intrinsic motivation, was provided by the same science teacher in her biology class a few weeks before. With twenty minutes left after finishing a lesson, she spontaneously introduced the next unit, on genetics, by throwing the students questions about the odds their own

children might be born with various disabilities such as Down's Syndrome. The students came alive with responses, a controlled and happy chaos of questions, remarks, anecdotes and puzzling case histories of their acquaintance. In the midst of a controversy about genetic propensities, two of the sophomores at my table thumbed through the next chapter, on genetics, scanning the boldface headings, the captions and photos and sidebars while their hands shot up: "The answer's right here, you guys."

This biology pre-reading session had in common with my students' session on "The Bear" the "experiential state" that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines in "Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation" (in Daedalus, Spring 1990, p. 115) which "distinguishes enjoyment from the rest of life." By hitting upon issues and instances of vital importance in an open, speculative atmosphere, the tenor of the discussion was changed--from the listless compliance often associated with academic schooling to the animated engagement of "enjoyment" associated with sports, hobbies, friendship. Csikszentmihalyi likens this state to **the flow experience**, or intrinsically rewarding involvement, that can make scaling a treacherous cliff, swimming in polar seas, or even reading Faulkner a personal compulsion.

With the cooperation of several Douglas County teachers, I set out to trace the impact on student achievement of pre-reading strategies, "flow experiences," and activation of emotional prior knowledge.

Classroom Pre-Reading Strategies and Their Impact

Curious whether she could determine "hard evidence" of pre-reading activators and their direct impact on comprehension, Marisue Swindle, a reading teacher at Cresthill Middle School, conducted an experiment with two similar-skilled seventh grade reading classes. The first group was asked to read a science chapter on disease and was provided with "During Reading" and "After Reading" strategies, but not "Before Reading" activities. The second group was asked to use all three strategies, including these pre-reading activators: "Skim for main idea; discuss what you already know; set a purpose for yourself (what do you want to know when you finish reading?) and skim for the teacher's goal for you (identify five different categories of disease and cite a specific example for each)

before you read the entire article." The results on the same reading comprehension quiz provided a significant difference in achievement; the second group, which applied the pre-reading strategies, averaged 5 fewer wrong answers (out of a possible 14 responses) than the first group.

Steve Johnson at Highlands Ranch High School began his first year teaching European history with a fresh sense of the distance between his expectations for the textbook readings and those of his students. He quickly discovered that students don't necessarily "understand" the facts they read in textbooks, don't necessarily retain the facts they do understand, don't necessarily synthesize and evaluate what they comprehend, nor do they necessarily have a burning desire to read chapters in a history textbook. Just as quickly, Steve set a high-level goal for his teaching, meaning to encourage open, critical thinking about and beyond the "facts" of history. He became curious about the impact of pre-reading during his second semester as the class approached the chapter on the French Revolution. He decided to introduce the unit by using a structured inquiry model in which students formulated questions about a discrepant event--in this case, the sudden and absolute loss of power by an absolute monarch. Steve's students spent the entire class period forming ever more focused questions which required that they listen carefully to each other, re-evaluating and re-conceptualizing constantly as they drew upon all the shared prior knowledge in any way related to French history. Every single important condition of and concept about the revolution was activated in the speculative atmosphere; perhaps most important, the students came to realize that they must constantly refine their generalizations and grasp the specific and varied motives of the many factions involved. Because the period ended before the answer was revealed, several students threatened to find it in the textbook. "Some of them actually hung around during passing period begging me to let them sneak a look at the chapter."

Steve and I each overheard positive student comments on the activating process--offered from both extremes of the achievement spectrum. Results on the unit exam indicate that this increased motivation improved scores: first semester students, who read the chapter "cold," scored an average of 75%; second semester students scored an average of 82%.

"But the numbers weren't as important to me," Steve reflected, "as much as the change in the atmosphere for learning." In concord with flow

theory, Steve's students, having been challenged from the beginning to think creatively, made a more personal connection to the facts of the revolution. One class I visited was clamorously debating whether the introduction of metrical measurements in August, 1794, had any significance to the revolutionary chronology of events. Most important in Steve's observation was the "mood set for thinking and speculation" throughout the unit, along with his own increased tendency to go on activating students' thoughtfulness as he introduced new historical situations and moral dilemmas. This translated into role-playing--the division of class into various representatives of the three French Estates (along with a mob's expulsion of the aristocrats)--and frequent decision-making committees and documents. In essence, the students were asked to speculate, and sometimes to take a moral stand, at each treacherous turn of the history, learning not only the facts as they proceeded, but internalizing the revolution and its ongoing, dynamic meanings.

Tom Ward, teaching The Call of the Wild at Castle Rock Junior High, wanted to see if writing could both guide the thematic analysis while reading and serve as preparation for more focused writings to follow the reading. Drawing on the text's identification of five of six major thematic motifs in the novel, Tom translated these into general topics for students to respond to in personal writings--for example, observations on the impact of greed, or on the relations between man and animal, or speculation on the survival instinct. Tom felt that these writings and the open discussion that resulted led to greater awareness of the themes as they developed in the reading. Because he planned to teach higher-level thinking overtly, he had each student commit to a theme to trace and found close correspondence between the pre-writings, the "envisioning" during reading, and the better-supported thematic analyses students wrote after the novel. In the end, Tom concluded that the pre-writing, pre-thinking activity helped focus thematic exploration.

Gretchen Simons experimented with the impact of speculative questions, one concrete, one abstract, prior to introducing her Ponderosa High School sophomores to Catcher in the Rye. In open discussion, the students charted their responses to the first question, "What has stayed the same since the 1950's and what has changed?" Then they were asked to keep in mind the second question, "Is it possible to remain sincere in a world that seems to be full of phonies?" as they progressed through the novel. Gretchen felt that the specific responses, while energetic, weren't as

important as the tone which the questioning process itself established. "Journals were the way in" to each student's progress toward meaning-making, and like Tom, Gretchen felt that the pre-reading activators helped focus and enrich the written responses. The 50's discussion, for example, kept echoing in the journals as students found specific revelations about the surprising lack of change in adolescent concerns over two generations, often expressed as, "...this is still so true today." The sincere/phony questions had larger ramifications as students wrestled with the paradox of Holden's constant complaints about phoniness with his own "phony" and dishonest episodes, leading several students straight to the theme of self-delusion and to speculation on the source of sincerity's failure ("Is phoniness just our devil trying to put on the face of our angel?"). Most significantly, the students tenaciously traced the theme to the very end, linking Holden's surrender of the role of "catcher in the rye" to the theme of sincerity. "I think they took the opening questions," Gretchen concluded, "as permission to go on questioning all the way through."

Ann Kitchin, an experienced English teacher at Cresthill Middle School, decided to conduct the most elaborate of these pre-reading experiments. In collaboration with her academic team of eighth grade teachers, Ann approached teaching the play version of The Diary of Anne Frank anxious to expand upon her innovations the previous year, when she had led the students through a series of personalized "thematic activators" prior to reading. This year she wanted her students to think more deeply about the social/historical implications of discrimination, since even though the play stresses the domestic tensions in the hideout, the Franks are in fact imprisoned throughout the play, and the force standing guard is religious and "racial" discrimination. Since most of her students had little emotional experience with discrimination in a prosperous, largely white suburban community, Ann and her social studies teammate devised a role playing activity based on the late 60's film, Eye of the Storm. The eighth graders were herded into a common room on a fictitious pretext where a high school teacher treated the blue-eyed students to games and snacks while the brown-eyed students completed worksheets and endured numerous reprimands. Afterwards, informed of the real purpose of the activity, the students discussed the emotions aroused by the unequal treatment, often with heat and passion, emotions that were not contained by the time the bell rang.

Ann's eighth graders discussed discrimination as a social phenomenon, but

no overt connections were drawn between the eye-color activity and the play prior to the reading. After the students had finished reading and discussing the play, I distributed a survey to determine whether the students' experience reading and understanding The Diary of Anne Frank was affected by the eye-color activity. In response to the question, "Did you make any connections to the eye-color activity as you read the play?" 56 students responded positively while 28 claimed to make no connections. I say "claimed" because the majority of negative respondents answered later questions in a way that indicated the activity was very much on their minds (perhaps the survey itself prodded their thinking). Almost all students gave specific examples of connections they made on their own, whether general ("When I went home I thought about the play a lot, and how we were separated, brown eyes from blue eyes. That made a connection in my mind about when the Nazi soldiers separated people in concentration camps") or to specific scenes ("I thought about {the eye-color activity} when Mr. Dussel was telling everyone what was happening out in the world and when Peter ripped off the Star of David"). Almost all of the students affirmed that the eye-color activity helped motivate them to read the play--despite the teacher's making no explicit connection--including most of those who claimed to make no connections at all. Most important, 59 of the 84 respondents were able to state how the eye-color activity helped them understand the play's "main ideas and concepts," often in quite specifically personal and emotional terms:

> "When we talked about anger and hatred, I remembered the anger most people felt that first day."
>
> "{The eye-color activity} did help me see the racism on TV and even in my own neighborhood with my black neighbors. Every time (while reading the play) I thought about how people could be so cruel and heartless, I wanted to do something about it."

The student's positive responses didn't surprise Ann, who confirmed and amplified their impressions of the pre-reading activity's impact on motivation and higher-level thinking. Since she was also able to compare this year's group last year's, she concluded that the activity helped the "entire unit go better." Even though she characterized this year's group as less academically inclined, their achievement on all indicators was higher, especially the unit final exam, and the "comfort level" for sharing thoughts and questions was much improved. When I asked if the students

made any specific references to the eye-color activity during the play, she affirmed: "One girl even made a connection with Ann Frank's 'discrimination' against her mother." But the greatest indicator of improvement was the quality of the thematic discussion. "The students were more conceptually specific," Ann said, "and their challenges for each other were much more emotion-packed and thoughtful." Questions were more in-depth, written responses more sophisticated, "This year's were so much better," Ann concluded, "that I threw last year's 'best' examples out."

Three Resulting Themes

In my observations of these intensely self-challenging teachers, I perceived three recurring themes on pre-reading's impact in their classrooms: first, to paraphrase Gretchen Simons, questions led to more questions; the activities themselves provided students with overt models of a thoughtful, questioning demeanor with which to proceed into the reading. Seeing this confirmed by greater student achievement in classroom after classroom around the district reminded me freshly of the intrigue of a new reader's encounter with a text--how each new personality and personal history rewrites and renews the literature, just as the literature "rewrites" the reader. By beginning with engaging the students' perceptions, prior knowledge, and conceptualizing--even by encouraging bafflement and dissonance--we send the covert but definite message that all readings are new, that good reading equals active thinking.

Second, I could not help but notice the number of times I noted the term "emotional" when discussing activation strategies during my research, or the number of times I searched for adjectives to describe the students' emotions during the discussions I observed: "focused chaos," "heated," "intense" and so on. I have to conclude that activating the students' emotions, whether about genetic defects, social injustice or the possibility of sincerity, seems essential as a "reading strategy." Is personal, emotional connection a precondition for the qualities that motivate and surround good reading--for curiosity, for the "flow experience," for access to higher-level thinking? My observations, the students' reactions and achievement, and the teachers' reflections certainly imply that the answer is an emphatic yes.

Finally, in several cases the teacher's own methodology seemed to become more innovative as the reading or unit study proceeded. It was as if the activation strategy kept on activating new approaches to discrete segments of the teaching--a reading log assignment might evolve into a pre-reading activity for the next scene or chapter; the original wordsplash returned to, modified, recolored or reshaped as the next new data might demand; the inquiry preceding the history chapter might evolve into the next open inquiry about the historical aftermath.

As I plan for teaching literature next year, I'll begin with these conclusions, giving more thought to the prelude. Before my students take off downriver with Huck Finn and well before Huck himself lights off for the territories, we'll be thinking about our observations of abusive parents, puritanical relatives, the possibility of friendship across age, caste, and race, and any crises of conscience we've wrestled with. Passing out the book will not be one of the ways we start the novel but one of the ways we continue to proceed.